



# Digital Adaptations

June 2021

This brief is one of a four-part series examining how collaboratives funded through JPMorgan Chase's *AdvancingCities* and PRO Neighborhoods competitions adjusted their activities in response to COVID-19 and the racial justice movement in 2020. This brief focuses on the digital adaptations the collaboratives made. Visit [this page](#) to read the other briefs on supporting small businesses, ensuring housing affordability and stability, and advancing racial equity.

Public health measures enacted to slow the spread of COVID-19 required *AdvancingCities* and PRO Neighborhoods collaboratives to turn to remote methods of communication and service delivery to carry out their work. This transition to virtual activities required the collaboratives to address disparities in access to technology and internet that low-income communities and communities of color face.

## Key Findings

- Public health guidelines enacted during the COVID pandemic forced collaboratives and residents to **transition to virtual** environments for communication and service delivery.
- Collaboratives used virtual outreach, remote service provision, funds for technology and remote setups, and partnerships with community organizations to **continue providing services and reaching their target populations** through the pandemic.
- In some cases, remote offerings were popular and collaboratives are considering how to **build on their success** once the pandemic subsides.
- In transitioning to remote services, organizations struggled to reach some individuals and families due to a **lack of internet access** or digital literacy. These limitations were particularly prevalent in low-income communities and communities of color.



## Background

The organizations funded through JPMorgan Chase's *AdvancingCities* and PRO Neighborhoods competitions work collaboratively to strengthen communities and address a pressing local need. In October 2020, Abt interviewed representatives from sixteen collaboratives. The collaboratives provide technical assistance and financing to local businesses, capital and training for affordable housing development, and cross-cutting solutions to address workforce challenges, among other activities. Although the projects and communities served by each collaborative are unique, all share a commitment to addressing economic and racial inequity in their respective neighborhoods. These neighborhoods have a long history of disinvestment and discriminatory practices such as redlining that have disadvantaged people of color.

## The Challenge

Collaboratives faced numerous challenges that arose from shifting their programs and services to a virtual environment, the most prominent of which include:

- Rethinking and adjusting approaches to conducting outreach, delivering products, and providing training and technical assistance while complying with public health guidelines that limited in-person gatherings; and
- Navigating the impacts of the digital divide, as some individuals within low-income communities and communities of color lacked the necessary infrastructure to effectively transition to a virtual environment.

## The Response

Collaboratives adjusted their outreach by using social media, video platforms, websites, and new software to communicate with residents and streamline services. Collaboratives also worked to mitigate the impacts of the digital divide by partnering closely with neighborhood organizations, creating services that do not require internet access, and providing computers and software for program participants. We present a few examples of the collaborative's activities below.

**To continue providing their programs and services and conducting community outreach, many collaboratives turned to virtual events, social media, and various software platforms.** These shifts were largely successful and allowed the collaboratives to continue to reach their target populations, despite the restrictions that arose from COVID-19 public health protocols. While collaboratives developed innovative ways to inform their clients and communicate online, they recognized that they also needed to take additional action to reach members of their target populations that lacked internet access or digital media skills.

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<sup>1</sup> All of the *AdvancingCities* and PRO Neighborhoods collaboratives are listed here: <https://www.abtassociates.com/files/Projects/PDFs/2021/advancingcities-and-pro-neighborhoods-collaboratives-2014-2020.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Abt interviewed representatives from the lead grantee organization from the five collaboratives that received *AdvancingCities* challenge grants in 2019, the seven collaboratives that received PRO Neighborhoods grants in 2019, and the four collaboratives that received PRO Neighborhoods grants in 2018.

- **Memphis CDFI Network** (Memphis, TN, 2019 grantee) significantly expanded digital outreach during the pandemic and partnered with a trusted neighborhood organization to make sure residents were informed about relevant local news and collaborative opportunities and activities. The Memphis CDFI Network works to increase affordable housing, expand small businesses, and improve the financial health of residents in the majority Black Frayser and Whitehaven neighborhoods. To support their community during the pandemic, the collaborative and its lead partner, United Housing:
  - created a COVID-19 resource website and uploaded weekly blog posts that informed readers of relevant policy changes and resources on topics such as eviction moratoria;
  - created an online application system using Smartsheet software that streamlined the intake of utility assistance applications; and,
  - organized and held a Facebook Town Hall to discuss racial equity and Black homeownership.

Additionally, United Housing staff attended weekly neighborhood meetings held by Frayser Exchange Club to inform residents of housing updates and resources. These meetings retained their participation numbers (about 40 residents) even after shifting to a virtual setting. Rental counselors also received training from NeighborWorks America's virtual training institute to prepare for increased questions, phone calls, and assistance requests from residents.

- **Advancing San Diego (ASD)** (San Diego, CA, 2019 grantee) adapted their internship program so participants could participate remotely. The collaborative promotes economic security for residents and small businesses by connecting traditionally underserved students in educational institutions to high-demand jobs provided by small technology companies through an internship program. ASD had planned to hold in-person workshops that would prepare the small businesses to host interns. After the onset of the pandemic, the collaborative conducted the workshops remotely and adjusted the content to support businesses in hosting the internships virtually.

Despite the quick changes, all the businesses originally involved in the program remained and were able to attend the virtual internship training. To help small businesses better manage their interns and provide meaningful internship experiences, the collaborative purchased licenses for a remote management platform. To meet students' technology needs, ASD paid for students' computers and home offices with funds intended for transportation passes and professional clothes.





Collaboratives adapted remote services to reach those lacking internet access or other needed technologies and addressed the impacts of the digital divide in their communities. COVID-19 exacerbated the adverse effects of a pre-existing digital divide in many communities. Many individuals within low-income communities and communities of color lack high-speed Internet access that is essential to success in remote work and school environments. A majority of the collaboratives we interviewed identified the digital divide as a challenge they faced in meeting community needs and conducting outreach while shifting to a virtual setting. Successful adaptations involved partnering with community organizations to determine needs and distribute resources and providing services to address technology gaps.

- **The Dallas Collaborative for Equitable Development (DCED)**

(Dallas, TX, 2019

grantee) enhanced their relationships with and increased their reliance on neighborhood partners to reach their community during the pandemic. The collaborative focuses on job creation, housing, and



real estate investment in three majority Black and Latinx neighborhoods: the Bottom, Forest District, and West Dallas neighborhoods. While the three neighborhoods are situated just 1.5 miles from downtown Dallas and the global headquarters for a national telecommunications company, many individuals within the neighborhoods lack broadband or wireless connectivity. To accommodate these limitations and lack of broadband internet access, DCED turned to neighborhood organizations to identify community needs and provide referrals for technical assistance and loan provisions. Dallas College, a collaborative partner, had hired a coordinator prior to the pandemic to be on the ground every day in the target neighborhoods to reach residents. Once public health measures were enacted, the coordinator could no longer conduct outreach this way. The coordinator instead met weekly with community organizations to discuss needs, and DCED began to depend heavily on neighborhood organizations to provide referrals for their technical assistance and loans.

*“All these neighborhoods are within a mile and a half from the center of the city, downtown Dallas. But there’s no access to broadband... you can look at the [telecommunications company] headquarters building from these neighborhoods and you cannot get a Wi-fi signal.”*

– Real Estate Community Fund, lead partner of DCED



- **Syracuse Surge** (Syracuse, NY, 2019 grantee) decided to shift their focus and address the challenges the digital divide posed for businesses owned by people of color. The collaborative is focused on expanding the technology industry in Syracuse by providing individuals with job training and connections to high-tech jobs and expanding the capacity of minority-owned, technology-industry businesses. However, the pandemic revealed the extent to which the digital divide affected “main street” businesses and the collaborative identified an opportunity to help. Many businesses integral to the local economy lacked the knowledge and capacity to use technology to adapt their businesses in the pandemic. For example, a West African food market owned by a Ghanaian immigrant struggled, in part because the owner lacked the technological infrastructure to implement online services. In response, the collaborative engaged in a human-centered design process to identify and develop appropriate technical assistance offerings to help businesses implement technology solutions, such as e-commerce and online marketing.

## Lessons Learned

Although the collaboratives employed somewhat different strategies, their experiences highlight effective strategies for providing remote services and programs.

**The collaboratives built virtual communication skills that they can expand upon in the post-COVID-19 era to reach new people.** Many collaboratives quickly and successfully adapted their services and activities to meet community needs in a virtual environment. The use of video-streaming platforms and social media led to record attendance at some offerings. Some collaboratives plan to continue to use virtual technology to reach a broader audience, even after the pandemic has receded.



**The collaboratives developed creative solutions to mitigate the effects of the digital divide.** Because technology requires digital knowledge and access, many people in the collaboratives' target neighborhoods struggled to connect to needed services, particularly in low-income communities and communities of color. To ensure people could still attain the resources they needed, collaboratives worked closely with community-based partners and purchased necessary equipment.

**Collaboratives relied on community-based organizations to overcome the limitations of virtual communications and services.** As communities' needs evolved in the wake of the pandemic and the associated social distancing protocols, collaboratives could not rely on traditional communications methods for understanding their needs. Instead, they worked closely with on-the-ground organizations that were highly attuned to the changes. Close partnerships with community-based organizations helped ensure the collaboratives had input on necessary programming changes to meet community needs and ways to share information with local residents.

This report was prepared by Abt Associates as part of its evaluation of *AdvancingCities* and PRO Neighborhoods.

Abt Associates is an international policy and research organization with a 50 year history of conducting rigorous evaluations and supporting implementation of housing and community development initiatives. In 2018, JPMorgan Chase selected Abt Associates to be the national evaluator of PRO Neighborhoods and *AdvancingCities*.

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JPMorgan Chase is one of the oldest financial institutions in the United States. JPMorgan Chase invests millions of dollars each year to enable more people to contribute to and share in the rewards of a growing economy. PRO Neighborhoods is a \$125 million initiative designed to support communities with the capital and tools they need to drive local solutions to address key drivers of inequality. *AdvancingCities* is a \$500 million, five-year initiative to drive inclusive growth and create greater economic opportunity in cities across the world.

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## About *AdvancingCities* and PRO Neighborhoods

The benefits and hardships that result from changing economic conditions accrue unevenly; some communities, neighborhoods, and individuals thrive while others are left behind. To help more people benefit from a growing economy, JPMorgan Chase created two initiatives, the *AdvancingCities* Challenge and the Partnerships for Raising Opportunity in Neighborhoods (PRO Neighborhoods) Competition, to support cross-cutting projects that enact creative, sustainable solutions to local challenges. The competition winners are collaboratives, comprising two or more local organizations from among the nonprofit, government, and business sectors. Collaborative partners work together to apply innovative approaches to solve complex local challenges.

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